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SUBJECT: DRUZE DEPUTY MINISTER PROMOTING GOLAN DRUZE
CONTACTS WITH SYRIA

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Cunningham, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Deputy Minister for the Development of the Negev and Galilee and member of Knesset Ayoub Kara briefed the Ambassador February 9 on his projects promoting closer ties between residents of the Golan Heights and Syria. Kara, a Likud Party member who is also Druze and the only Arab member of the Netanyahu government, took credit for an initiative to open the Golan border with Syria once a month, claiming that 600 Golan residents have visited Syria in the past year, including 50 women. Kara also said he has been approached by unidentified Syrian representatives interested in providing irrigation water to the Golan. The Druze on the Golan reportedly export apples to Syria, which the Syrians in turn re-export to the Gulf. The additional water would enable Druze farmers to expand their apple production, and to grow additional produce. Kara argued that expanded human contact and economic ties between the Golan Druze and Syria would help create a more conducive atmosphere for Israeli-Syrian negotiations. Noting that Prime Minister Netanyahu supports his efforts but does not want to push too hard due to the opposition of other ministers, Kara requested that the U.S. Embassy in Damascus convey U.S. support for the water idea to the Syrian government. The Ambassador made no commitment but said we would report his request. Kara also made an impassioned plea on behalf of the residents of Ghajar, arguing that it made no sense to divide the village, whose residents have no desire to become Lebanese and whose territory should not have been divided by the UN. He warned that proceeding with the UN solution would lead to tension in the area. The Ambassador replied that we recognize that the village is in a difficult situation, but we support implementation of UNSCR 1701 and that the UN proposal being discussed with Israel is a good faith effort to find a solution. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Deputy Minister Ayoub Kara, accompanied by his office director Mendi Safadi and an Israeli academic, Effi Lahav, called on the Ambassador February 9. PolCouns also attended the meeting. In a previous meeting with PolCouns, Kara described himself as the Israeli Arabs' channel to the Netanyahu government. As a Druze, Kara takes a strong interest in the well-being of the Druze on the Golan Heights, and has also presented himself as representing the interests of the Alawite residents of the divided village of Ghajar on the border between the Golan and Lebanon.

¶3. (C) Kara claimed that since becoming deputy minister about a year ago, he has taken the initiative to arrange the monthly transit of Druze residents, including religious leaders, from the Golan to visit their families and Druze religious congregations in Syria. According to Kara, about 600 Golan residents have been able to visit Syria as a result, including the first fifty women to visit Syria from the Golan. Kara also said he had secured GOI permission for 16 Druze university students who had studied in Damascus to return to the Golan. Kara said that in addition to the humanitarian aspect, he hopes to establish economic links

between the Golan and Syria that will help calm the atmosphere between Israel and Syria. Kara said Prime Minister Netanyahu supports his efforts, but Netanyahu does not want to push too hard since other members of the coalition, in particular Foreign Minister Lieberman, are opposed to facilitating contact between the Golan Druze and Syria. Since both the Israeli and Syrian governments are "afraid" of such contacts, Kara said the project needs support from the outside, especially the U.S.

¶4. (C) Kara said he had heard that Syria may be interested in providing water for irrigation to Druze apple farmers on the Golan. Druze farmers currently export apples to Syria, which the Syrians re-export to the Gulf, and with additional water they could expand their cultivation. Kara claimed Minister of Agriculture Simhon supports this idea, and Kara wants to send a delegation of Druze to Syria to explore Syrian interest. He appealed for U.S. support, noting that while a water deal would be good for Israel, the GOI is "afraid to take further steps." The Ambassador noted it would help if the overall Israeli-Syrian atmosphere were more positive. Kara mistakenly commented that the U.S. has returned its ambassador to Syria, and suggested that the U.S. ambassador could convey a supportive message on the water issue to the Syrian government. The Ambassador explained that we have not yet announced our ambassador-designate, but we do maintain a political dialogue. He noted that while the ICRC is supporting humanitarian visits to Syria by Golan Druze, economic cooperation such as the water project would require the support of the Israeli and Syrian governments. He assured Kara that he would inform Embassy Damascus and the State Department of Kara's activities.

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¶5. (C) On Ghajar, Kara said he is in close contact with the residents and noted that they are opposed to the UNIFIL plan.

Kara said the UN had made a serious error in 2000 when it based the Blue Line on the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, when none of the current states in the area existed, so that the UN-drawn Blue Line cut through the middle of the village.

Kara noted that while the Ghajar residents received Israeli citizenship after 1967, they are Syrian Alawites who have never considered themselves Lebanese and have no connection to Lebanon. Kara said the best solution would be to adjust the border between the Golan and Lebanon so that Ghajar could remain united. He cautioned that the Ghajar residents may resist UNIFIL and that imposing the UNIFIL plan will raise tensions in the area. The Ambassador recognized the difficulties facing the village but noted U.S. support for implementation of UNSCR 1701. The UNIFIL plan under discussion with Israel is a good-faith effort to find a workable solution.

¶6. (C) Comment: We are skeptical about the prospects for a water agreement of the sort Kara mentioned, but his promotion of closer human contacts between the Golan Druze and relatives in Syria appears to us to be both a positive humanitarian development and a small step toward confidence building.

Cunningham